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ABSTRACT

Dialogs are an effective tool for language acquisition and for transmission of cultural material. Much of the apparent confusion about how they should be used in the language classroom results from a failure to distinguish the ages and levels of proficiency of those for whom the dialogs are designed. The great advantage that dialogs have over other modes of presentation of any kind of new language material is not so much that they are a reflection of linguistic reality, but rather that they present the material in a context that students find relatively easy to remember. It is essential that the student be taught the meanings of the dialogs in as realistic a setting as the classroom allows. Dialogs are not an end in themselves but should show the student that what he is learning in the classroom is going to be useful outside the classroom as well, both as a source of expression and as an indication of what the other culture is like. Selection and techniques for presentation of dialogs are discussed. (AMM)

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ON THE USES OF DIALOGS IN LEARNING ENGLISH

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Dialogs are a prominent feature of many widely used texts in English as a second language.[1] They are assumed to provide a helpful aid to the acquisition of English, although it is not always clear how the dialogs are to be used. Sometimes they are very long, contain many different grammatical structures and seem to be totally unrelated to the things taught in the rest of the lesson. In other texts, supposedly designed for the same level of student, they are short, contain only one or two basic grammatical patterns and present only materials which are to be studied further in the same lesson. Instructions for use vary considerably - some ask for perfect memorization, others are less demanding. Some texts present the dialog as the first activity of the lesson, others as the last. Some view the dialog primarily as a device for the presentation of cultural material while others state that dialogs have importance only insofar as they provide a vehicle for the presentation of structural points. Teachers may well ask if dialogs are really so important, in the face of such variation of content and methodology.

I think dialogs are an effective tool for language acquisition and for transmission of cultural material and that much of the apparent confusion about how they should be used in the language classroom results from a failure to distinguish the ages and levels of proficiency of those for whom the dialogs are designed. The modes, times and emphases of dialog presentation will change with these

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factors as will their length and variety and complexity of syntax. So the types of questions we should ask ourselves as teachers are not "Do we do dialogs before or after pattern practice?" or "Do dialogs teach patterns or cultural content better?", but rather "When should dialogs precede pattern practice?" and "At what levels of proficiency should grammar presentation take precedence over cultural content in dialogs?"

All dialogs presented in ESL classes purport to be a reflection of typical conversations as they might occur in real situations in the English-speaking world. When we compare actual conversations[2] with ESL textbook versions we see that the reflections are often very dim indeed. In fact, the same thing can be said of conversations in plays or novels, namely, that they are not like real-life dialogs at all. Nonetheless, textbook dialogs do contain the vocabulary items and idiomatic expressions of real conversations, even if they lack the uncertain referents, the interruptions and sudden changes of subject matter which characterize the latter. For all proficiency levels then, ESL dialogs should introduce vocabulary items which will be useful to the student in real situations.

The great advantage that dialogs have over other modes of presentation of any kind of new language material is not so much that they are a reflection of linguistic reality, but rather that they present the material in a context that students find relatively easy to remember. The grammatical patterns which occur in text book dialogs, and the sounds and intonation contours which accompany them do not seem to be particularly dependent upon any specific semantic contexts; all

of these can thus be varied at will to fit whatever other goals the dialog writer has in mind.

At the elementary level of proficiency, as Lado so justly remarks, "the beginning student does not hear the target language. He controls none of its grammar, none of its vocabulary....The student must break into the language. He must establish a linguistic beachhead."[3] Since the student at this level simply has no competence whatsoever in the language, all material is new material for him. Dialogs for the beginning student should give him exposure to the basic grammatical patterns of English, its sounds and intonation contours, and a few basic vocabulary items and idiomatic expressions that he can use right away. A beginning student of English in an English-speaking environment will need to know greetings, expressions of courtesy, how to order a meal, ask for directions, buy things, get rid of unwanted salesmen - in short, how to conduct his everyday affairs in English. Where English is not the language of everyday affairs, it will of course not be so urgent to teach these things from the very beginning. Because the student knows nothing of English, the teacher or textbook writer should not expose the student to too much linguistic material at once, or the learning tasks will seem insurmountable. The first few dialogs might consist of a few exchanges of greetings, such as Good morning, Mr. X. How are you?; Very well, thank you. How are you, Mr. Y? The purpose of these dialogs is simply to teach the student some English sounds and a few everyday expressions, so that he can begin to speak and understand the language. It is essential that the

student be taught the meanings of the dialogs in as realistic a setting as the classroom allows. While translations are sometimes necessary, they tend to deemphasize cultural differences in the use of even such things as greetings. Photographs, film strips and other graphic devices to depict the situations and activities of the dialog are a good way to convey meanings, if the teacher can use them unambiguously. Vague gestures in the direction of the picture are confusing. Sets of gestural conventions have to be established among the students, the teacher and the visual aids. Further, the teacher must demonstrate that materials taught in the dialogs are usable outside the language classroom. He can do this by using dialog utterances when speaking to the students in non-classroom situations. He can also expose them to recordings of real-life situations which contain dialog utterances as well as urge students to listen for them and to use them in English-language milieus.

After the student has learned a few useful phrases through the use of very simple, very short dialogs, other linguistic elements may be introduced in the same format. For example, a particular basic sentence pattern, say Noun + Be + Adverbial as in The book is in the drawer, if it occurs in a dialog that is to be memorized, can provide the student with memory aids for the forms of be, word order, and other characteristics of all such English sentences. Or, if he can learn to pronounce [ð] as in this perfectly in a particular dialog, he can recall his own production of that sound and use it as a model when imitation of a native speaker's model is impractical. Vocabulary items learned in the meaningful context of a dialog are much more likely to be retained than if they are learned in sets of unconnected

sentences. At this stage, each dialog should be no longer than about six or eight short utterances and the teacher should take care not to introduce more than one new basic sentence pattern per dialog. New sounds should be introduced in old sentence patterns so that the student does not have too great a learning burden at once.

The presentation and memorization of dialogs for beginning students should probably precede other language learning activities such as grammar drill and pronunciation exercises, if only because the language items in the dialog provide, as suggested above, models for those other activities. The instructor should say the dialog several times, before asking the students to repeat, making sure that the students understand when there is a change of speaker and that they grasp the meaning of the dialog. Change of speaker can be indicated by change of voice quality, by moving from one appropriate spot to another, through the use of pictures of different people which the teacher alternates, or through the use of a recording with different people taking the various roles. Once the meaning is understood, the students should repeat each utterance after the teacher, first as a group, then with half the class taking one role and half the other. Successively smaller divisions are then made until each individual has had an opportunity to repeat all utterances in the dialog. To achieve variety, the teacher can switch from individual, to group, to row practice randomly, instead of always progressing from whole group to individual practice with the same intermediate steps. During the repetition practice, the teacher can also require different performance criteria, once emphasizing intonation contours, another

time word order or sentence rhythm, and so forth.

But repetition of a teacher's model is not enough. The student must also be able to produce the dialog utterances without a model, because it is unlikely that he will ever be able to produce original utterances if all he ever does in the language is to repeat what others have just said. The instructor can help him attain this goal by providing verbal cues. These consist of relatively large portions of each dialog utterance at first, but after sufficient practice, the student usually needs only a single word cue to recall the entire dialog. It is most helpful to provide cues from the ends of utterances, so that the terminal intonation contours can be reproduced correctly as well as because the most important content words tend to occur at the ends, rather than at the beginnings of English sentences. However, even satisfactory production of the dialog with a single verbal cue is not enough. The student should be able to say all parts of the dialog with no cues from the instructor. This level of performance will usually be enough to ensure that the student will in fact be able to recall a particular dialog utterance so that he can use it as a model for other original utterances. Visual cues can replace spoken ones as a step toward the achievement of this goal, until the students can reproduce the dialog, with appropriate gestures, facial expressions and pronunciation, with no help at all from the teacher.

If the subject matter of the dialog is interesting to the students, the dialog will be learned relatively painlessly; if not, even very short dialogs can take too long to memorize and only then at great expense of spirit, for students and teachers alike. Textbook dialogs are usually designed to appeal to the widest possible market and thus often, like TV programs, wind up appealing to no one.

Adults past university age are not ordinarily interested in the daily lives of university students, so a dialog which deals with such students' reactions to the latest football game is not a particularly interesting one for them. Adults in an English-speaking environment might want to know, among other things, how to talk to immigration officials, arrange for various services such as Cable TV and discuss environmental pollution. They will also be interested to know how English-speaking people behave and react to events, especially if their reactions are different from those of the adult students for culturally determined reasons. Adolescents tend to be interested in social problems which directly affect them, such as drug addiction, the discussion of emotional experiences and culture heroes. Younger children are concerned with cartoon characters, sports, word games, songs and animals. The point is that there is nothing sacred about the dialog as it appears in the textbook. The subject matter of each dialog can be changed by the imaginative and perceptive teacher to fit the interests of his students, and the neutral vapid materials too often found in texts should be changed. The only thing to bear in mind when changing the subject matter of a dialog is to maintain the same basic sentence patterns as the original, especially if drill materials in the lesson are introduced in the dialog sentences. Otherwise it would be difficult to maintain the graded sequencing of the textbook.

A beginning student of ESL should have learned all of the basic sentence patterns of English by the end of the introductory course.[4] He should know how to understand and produce appropriate instances

of them in ordinary situations. He will not have a very large vocabulary, nor will he be familiar with many of the possible modifications of the basic sentences. Dialog materials for the intermediate level should be presented in the same way as those of the elementary level, and the instructor should require similar performance from the students, but sentences in these dialogs should contain more complicated kinds of modification than those for the elementary level. The utterances will be longer and there will be more of them, perhaps as many as twenty. Several different basic sentence patterns will occur in the same dialog, so that the student will be exposed to more natural linguistic contexts than were possible at the elementary level. However, since the sentences of the dialog are longer, the student may have greater difficulty in repeating the entire utterance without build-ups. These may either be based on rhythmic or syntactic considerations, although in many cases, of course, the two will coincide. It will often be useful to start from the end of the sentence so that intonation contours can be maintained. In the sentence That terrible dog with the pink nose nearly bit off my hand, the rhythmic beats might fall on terrible, nose, nearly, and hand, if there is a pause between nose and nearly. If the students have difficulty in producing the sentence accurately when it is presented as a whole, the instructor should break up the sentence into its rhythmic units and model them from the end of the sentence, first the rhythmic centers and then their satellites. The cues would be the following (with pauses between each cue for student imitation): hand / my hand / nearly / nearly bit off / nearly bit

off my hand / nose / the pink nose / with the pink nose / terrible / terrible dog / that terrible dog / that terrible dog with the pink nose / that terrible dog with the pink nose // nearly bit off my hand. This approach is very often effective, even for students who have very grave pronunciation problems.

During the advanced stages of language acquisition, the student not only perfects his knowledge of involved syntactic structures and expands his vocabulary range, but should also start to develop, if he has not already done so, an awareness of the linguistic features which are appropriate to particular varieties of English, or what we might call the objective correlates of the impressionistic "feeling for the language". Dialogs can be used to further this awareness, through variation in the roles of the people in the dialog, subject matter, "point of view", and so forth. Fine points of pronunciation and unusual intonation contours can profitably receive attention at this level. Presentation and performance requirements may vary somewhat from the elementary and intermediate levels. For example, the teacher may assign topics and readings for classroom discussion rather than provide ready-made dialogs, especially if he can maintain some kind of syntactic and stylistic control during the discussion. His role would be to point out the specific structural devices that are typically used for a given topic and under what circumstances they are likely to occur. If the students are not quite so advanced, the teacher can provide a model dialog and then ask the students to use the same sequence signals and syntactic devices but to vary the vocabulary within a specific semantic area. In this way there is

some control, but the student is not just memorizing a specific set of sentences. He is instead learning how to express himself on a given topic, using a variety of structural devices and an appropriate range of vocabulary correctly. The only step that remains is for him to achieve control of English without conscious awareness of structural devices, and it seems unreasonable to expect that this will ever happen in a language classroom.

We should all remember that dialogs are not an end in themselves, nor is any other language teaching device. When the student has memorized a dialog or correctly responded to a cue in a pattern drill, it does not necessarily mean that he has mastered the patterns being taught. It is only when he can generalize from those correct responses and apply them to new situations that he can be said to have learned them. As language teachers, we should provide as many opportunities as we can for our students to use their second language in meaningful and interesting situations, both inside and outside the language classroom. Dialogs can be useful in teaching ESL, but they should show the student that what he is learning in the classroom is going to be useful outside the language classroom as well, both as a source of expression and as an indication of what the other culture is like. If they do, they are providing a useful service to teachers and students alike.

Footnotes

1. The following all use dialogs as a teaching device:

   Agard, F. B. El Inglés Hablado, New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1953.

   Roberts, Paul. Corso d'inglese parlato, 3 vols., New York: Harcourt Brace, 1963-65.

   Rutherford, William E. Modern English: A Textbook for Foreign Students, New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968.

2. See Crystal, David and Derek Davy. Investigating English Style, London and Harlow: Longmans, Green and Co., Ltd., 1969, pp. 97-102 and pp. 116-119, for instances of actual face-to-face and telephone conversations, respectively.

3. Lado, Robert. Language Teaching: A Scientific Approach, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964, p. 61.

4. A useful list of basic sentence patterns and their transformations can be found in the following work:

   Roberts, Paul. Modern Grammar, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1967.